

Sovereignty of the Subaltern : Satyavati's Journey from the Riverbank to the Throne

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Abstract

Kavita Kane is an Indian novelist and a former journalist. She excels in retelling the stories from the Hindu epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Her debut novel, *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* achieved a great popularity and paved the way for writing other novels like *Sita's*, *Sister Lanka's Princess*, *Menka's Choice*, *Ahilya's Awakening*, and *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*. She gives a different dimension to the stories by narrating them. From a different perspective, generally through the viewpoint of marginalized characters, the narrative of the Mahabharata is male centric and focus on the values and skills of great warriors like Bhishma, Guru Dronacharya, King Dhruvad Pandavas, sons of King Pandu and the Kauravas sons of King Dhritarashtra. Though Satyavati occupies a considerable textual space in the mainstream narratives of the Mahabharata, she is never celebrated as an ideal woman. Her character is marked with social stigma. The character of Satyavati is portrayed as an ambitious, ruthless women who could stoop to abysmal levels of inhumanity or cruelty to appease her power hungry stomach. Despite her attempt to continue the legacy of the Kuru Dynasty. Satyavati is assumed to be the main cause of the annihilation of the Kuru Dynasty. Kavita Kane through her revisionist novel, *The Fisher Queens Dynasty*, subverts the patriarchal notions of women and gives enough space to the marginalized, overlooked characters to unveil their suppressed feelings and desire.

Keywords: Caste and Identity, The Matsyagandha Trop, Dynastic Politics, Internalized Patriarchy.

The story of Satyavati, Devrat and Shantanu is well known. It is usually presented as a brief prelude to the great Indian epic Mahabharata to explain the birth of Pandu and Dhritarashtra. But the key role of Satyavati in shaping the future of Hastinapur is not well known. Kavita Kane explores this story in depth. The author's characterization of Satyavati is commendable. She is able to capture her beauty, ambitions, vulnerability, and sorrow in the course of the book. I must credit the author for exposing the raw ambition of Satyavati through this dialogue:

"It is better I use my ambitions wisely. I would rather make use of a powerful man and get some benefits as I have done with Rishi Parashar. If it is looks and lust which can seduce a man, weaken him, then I shall employ them as my means; I shall use my charm to get what I want. I cannot afford to have morals like the rich and the royal. The righteous would argue that it is unscrupulous, but I would rather be branded that than be forgotten as a casualty, as my mother was. If men uses women, why can't women get something out of men? Beauty and lust is just that a means to an end." (Kane, 2017, p.32)

The myth of the Fisher Queen dates back centuries and reflects a deep cultural reverence for water as a life giving force. In many traditions, rivers, lakes and seas are not merely geographical features, but are imbued with spiritual significance. They are often personified by female figures who embody fertility and nurturing, serving as mediator between

the earthly and the divine. The Fisher Queen in particular, is frequently depicted as a guardian of these sacred waters, tasked with the preservation of their power and the wisdom they offer. The Fisher Queen, a central figure in various mythologies, particularly in Celtic and Arthurian traditions, embodies the archetype of the feminine as a source of life, wisdom, and transformation. Her role as the guardian of sacred waters positions her at the intersection of the spiritual and natural worlds. The waters she protects symbolize not only substance, but also the depth of the unconscious and the flow of emotional currents. In many narratives, her character illustrates the vital connection between femininity and nature, suggesting that the health of the environment is often tied to the status and well-being of women.

Satyavati was adopted daughter of the head of the fisherman chief Dasharaj. The story of her birth is very interesting. Once Indra had given to Vasu, the king of chedi, a heavenly crystal vehicle studded with jewels. With the help of that vehicle the king used to move about in the sky. That's why he came to be known as "uparichara". By his capital, flowed a river called "Suktimati". This river was once attacked by an animated mountain, "Kolahalla" madden in lust. Vasu struck that mountain with his foot and the river came out of the embrace of Kolahalla. The river had begotten from the mountain a son and her daughter. The river Shuktimati gave her twins to Vasu. The king made that son the general of his army and married the beautiful girl Girika.

Once Girika at her proper time for childbearing waits for her husband, but the king is sent away for hunting by his ancestors to kill a beast. Spring season and attractive scenery of the forest makes the king love sick, so his semen comes out. He gives it to a Falcon and requests the Falcon to take it to his wife Girika. The Falcon is attacked by a hawk and the simon falls into the river Yamuna an Apsara, named Adrika, who had become a fish by a curse of Brahma, consumes it. After ten months that fish is caught by a fisherman. Later, when he cut it, he is surprised to see a boy and a girl in the belly of the fish. The girl that is born from this fish has the odour of the fish. The fishermen takes these children to the king. The King gives the girl to the fisherman's chief named Dasharaj to adopt her. Satyavati's origin is complex, as she is born into royal lineage but remains unrecognized by her father. Uparichara Vasu's neglect renders her an outsider within her own family, highlighting the painful paradox of being a royal yet marginalized. Writer presents Satyavati's dark complexion as a central aspect of her identity, leading to her being labeled as Kali, a name that carries both stigma and strength. This label signifies societal prejudices against those who do not conform to the accepted standards of beauty, which often favors lighter skin tones. Writer explains that in many cultures, beauty is tied to societal acceptance, often leaving those who do not fit these molds feeling invisible and devalued.

After becoming Dasharaj's daughter, she comes to be known as Matsyagandha due to her stinking smell of fish. Once the sage Parasara sees Satyavati with all her extraordinary beauty, he expresses his desire to unite with her but Satyarthi denies by saying that other Rishis standing on both the bank are looking at them. Then Parashar creates a fog around the boat and unites with Satyavati. He gives her the boon of virginity and blesses her with excellent perfume. That will emit from her body. Having obtained her boon, she became highly pleased and her season immediately came, and she accepted the embrace of that Rishi of wonderful deeds. And she hence thenceforth became known among men by the name of Gandhivati, (the sweet scented one). And men could perceive her scent from the distance of a yojana and for this she was known by another names which was Yogananda (one who scatters her scent for a yojana all around)"(Ganguli. Adiparva.163.127). Due to the special powers of Parasara, she delivers her son on the spot. He grows up immediately and promises his mother that he would

be present whenever she calls him. After making this promise, he retires to the forest for penance. This son come to be known as Vyasa.

After spending four years, one day Shantanu went to the forest and in course of his ramble, he beheld a black-eyed maiden of celestial beauty, the daughter of a fisherman. Her arrival changes the situation. Devrath, son of Shantanu is the legal heir of the throne but he has to leave his right and he comes to be known as Bhishma because of his oath to remain unmarried for his whole life. All this happens because of Satyawati. His marriage with Shantanu, he takes this severe oath because Satyawati 's father agrees to marry Satyawati with King Shantanu only on one condition that "O king, what I ask of thee is this : the son born of this maiden shall be installed on thy throne, and none else shall thou make thy successor" (Ganguli ,Adi Parva 100.216). When Devavrata comes to know about the condition, he takes the vow of celibacy so that he could never be an aspirant to the throne. This effect laid down by Satyawati's character on the Kuru's dynasty twists the situations. King Shantanu begets two sons from her. With ranged a valiant hero and Vichitravirya great archer. After Shantanu's death, Bhishma installed Chitrangada on the throne with the approval of Satyawati. Chitrangada is very arrogant and insult even gods and asuras, so a war is fought between Chitrangada and Gandharva. In that battle, Gandharva kills Chitrangada. After Chitrangada was slain, his successor Vichitravirya, being a minor, Bhishma ruled the Kingdom, placing himself under the command of Satyawati.

In Kavita Kane, the Fisher Queens is portrayed not merely as a passive figure, but as an active guardian who embodies both strength and vulnerability. Her responsibilities extend beyond the physical realm of water. She is also a protector of knowledge and tradition. As one character reflects, "To gaze into the waters is to confront not just what lies beneath, but also what lies within" (Kavita. 2023, page 45). This statement encapsulates her role as a teacher guide guiding those who seek her counsel to confront their inner truth. The Fisher Queen's dynasty narrates the Mahabharata from the perspective of Satyawati, matriarch of the Kuru clan. As the story goes, Satyawati was a beautiful fisherman who caught the eye of King Shantanu of Hastinapur in return for her hand in marriage, Satyawati's father demanded that her children be the heirs to the Kingdom and not Bhishma, the King's son from his first marriage. Ever, the dutiful son, Bhishma, renounced his right to the throne and took a vow of celibacy. These decisions had a lasting impact on the dynasty-Queen Satyawati's grandchildren were the Kauravas and the Pandavas, who then engaged in a massive civil war for the throne, the Mahabharata war.

Satyavati is a person you can neither love nor disdain. She's a clever, tricky and manipulative lady whose main point is to get the lofty position of Hastinapur for her as well as her children. She will go to any length to accomplish her objective, obliterating many lives all the while. However, in spite of areas of strength for the quick attitude, Satyawati actually bears the aggravation of being projected away unfeelingly by her own father to confront the difficulty of neediness. She grows up with the thought advancing in her mind that power is security and provided that you have power, you will acquire regard. To stick to this power she makes one terrible decision after another, in the end making a dynasty that will wind up obliterating itself.

The Mahabharata praises women like Kunti and Draupadi for their sacrifices, tolerance, and submissiveness towards the male characters, particularly towards their husbands, but Kane's Satyawati refuses to be a pliable wife. She is too indomitable to be marginalized by the male dominated society. Whenever Shantanu tries to exert his domination over her, she refutes it demanding her rights as a queen. When Shantanu tells her to obey his commands as he is also a king, she says to Shantanu, "I am your wife your queen"(139). Satyawati makes her own decision using her sharp intellect. Shantanu, an emblem of patriarchy, makes Satyawati

responsible for his tragedy. According to him, she compelled him to marry her, forgetting his son, his former wife, Ganga. Shantanu claims that it was all her fault that he came close to her as she seduce him. He says that “she lit a carnal response in me”(165). Satyawati strongly protests against all his accusations. She is no passive sufferer of the injustices doled out to her by her husband. She’s always been a vocal person. Questioning his morality, she asserts he would have never married her if she had not demanded it. He willingly made sexual relations with her but then became reluctant to marry her. She chastises him and say, “I don’t know how can you pretend to be so grand and noble when you are the one who started it all”.(165)

Satyavati raises her voice also against the marginalization of the Fisher community. She categorically, says Shantanu “to treat them with the dignity they deserve”(139) as the fishermen are also his subjects. She empowers the Fisher folk. She extends all possible amenities to them. Everyone in Hastinapur, including King Shantanu, is displeased that she has taken Dasharaj, a fishermen to the court. But being a virulent rebel, she goes against everyone and gives her father a vital position in her court. There is no one to support Dasharaj in this old age except her, so she cannot evade her responsibilities towards him as a daughter. She believes in equality, not in discrimination of human beings based on their castes. She became the voice of the marginalized people and fights for their rights. She is well aware of her responsibilities. As a queen, she also fulfills her responsibilities towards her ill husband her subjects. She is unwavering in performing her duties.

She always acts according to the demand of the situation. She goes through emotional upheaval after the death of her son Chitrangada, but she never admits defeat to the situation. She states “queen needs to be more sensible than just sensitive”. Sensing the need for the hour, she arranges for her second son Vichitravirya’s marriage. She forces Bhishma to kidnap the three Princess of Kashi to get them married to Virya. She has always given priority to the throne of Hastinapur, and for the sake of it she does the most despicable act.

The myth of the Fisher Queen also with modern feminist discourse, particularly in the way it reclaims female power and agency. Satyawati’s strength, wisdom, and resilience offer a framework for contemporary women seeking to assert their influence in a world often dominated by patriarchal narratives.

Furthermore, the myth serves as a call to action for modern feminists, encouraging them to embrace their multifaceted identities. The Fisher Queen’s duality both nurturing and fierce reminds us that true empowerment comes from embracing all aspects of oneself, rejecting societal limitations that seek to define femininity in narrow terms.

To secure our place in this society is the greatest challenge. Women are the harbingers of change in a society. To fulfill this basic need is the greatest challenge in today’s context. Without women’s progress, there will be no revolution. It is noticeable that since ancient days, women have been suffering for various reasons. The main obstacle in their progress in life is the identity crisis where they do not possess a secure place. In the time of the Mahabharata, women did not have enough scope to express themselves. Satyawati, Kunti, Draupadi were very strong characters at the time. Satyawati is one of the most misunderstood characters of the Mahabharata. Kavita Kane’s *The Fisher Queen’s Dynasty* in the alternative retelling of the Mahabharata, depicts very skillfully the growth and development of the life of Satyawati. She is portrayed as a strong and independent woman who is able to fight for her own rights to take her own independent decisions. Her life is a story of transformation from Kali to Satyawati, Matsyagandha to Yojnagandha, a fisher girl to a queen. She made choices of her own and succeeded in attending those choices. Satyawati had the ability to be practical, ask logical questions, and participate in debates and discussions. Her obsession to make her own progeny the king of Hastinapur and her consequent plans that she executes to fulfill her desire were her

mode of resistance against the patriarchal institutions that insist on the continuation of the line of the Fathers. From a Fisher girl to becoming a queen signifies her shift from private space to public space that is meant for men rather than women. Her view of women as creator is a radical deviation from stereotypical patriarchal beliefs. Satyawati had an important role in the life of the venerable Bhishma and also as the mother of the great sage Vyasa who appears throughout in the Mahabharata as the most influential and highly revered adviser to the Kauravas and Pandavas whenever necessary.

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